

National Agenda



for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual
Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities

A
Teacher
Perspective

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*The
National Agenda for the
Education of Children
and Youths with Visual
Impairments, Including
Those with Multiple
Disabilities...A Teacher
Perspective*

Summer 2002

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National Agenda Goal Statements

- 1. Students and their families will be referred to an appropriate education program within 30 days of identification of a suspected visual impairment.**
- 2. Policies and procedures will be implemented to ensure the right of all parents to full participation and equal partnership in the education process.**
- 3. Universities, with a minimum of one full-time faculty member in the area of visual impairment, will prepare a sufficient number of educators of students with visual impairments to meet personnel needs throughout the country.**
- 4. Service providers will determine caseloads based on the needs of students and will require ongoing professional development for all teachers and orientation and mobility instructors.**
- 5. Local education programs will ensure that all students have access to a full array of placement options.**
- 6. Assessment of students will be conducted, in collaboration with parents, by personnel having expertise in the education of students with visual impairments.**
- 7. Access to developmental and educational services will include an assurance that instructional materials are available to students in the appropriate media and at the same time as their sighted peers.**
- 8. Educational and developmental goals, including instruction, will reflect the assessed needs of each student in all areas of academic and disability-specific core curricula.**

The National Agenda goal statements apply to all children and youths with visual impairments, including those with multiple disabilities. Parents, teachers, and adults with visual impairments identified these goals as critical outcomes to insure that children with visual impairments receive a quality education and these goals are the focal point of the National Agenda effort.

The goals in the National Agenda represent a wide spectrum of issues that have an impact on the quality of services provided to students in educational programs. Some goals have a direct relationship to teachers, such as Goal #4 (caseload management and continuing education), Goal #6 (assessment), Goal #7 (access to instructional materials), and Goal #8 (importance of teaching the expanded core curriculum). Other goals have an indirect relationship to teachers such as Goal #1 (timely referral) and Goal #3 (personnel preparation). Regardless of the relationship, your interest and involvement is important in achieving all of the National Agenda goals.

The National Agenda is designed to help support teachers and parents as they work to assure a quality education for children and youth through the school years. What teachers know and do has great impact on student progress and achievement. As a teacher of students with visual impairments, you play a pivotal role in the long-term success of your students. The purpose of this document is to provide you with information about the importance of the National Agenda and to identify how you can effectively embrace its mission and improve the lives of children and youth who are blind or visually impaired.

Implementation of the National Agenda

Role of Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs)

As a teacher of students with visual impairments, you play a key role in the overall functioning of the school program and you are in contact with a wide range of school personnel and your students' families and support systems. Specialized activities of a teacher of students with visual impairments include performing assessment and evaluation of students, mediating the learning environment and adapting the curriculum, providing guidance and counseling to students, communicating with administrators, providing supervision to instructional assistants, record keeping, and maintaining school community relations (Spungin & Ferrell, 1991). In addition to these supportive activities, TVIs provide direct instruction in the expanded core curriculum content areas. Although teachers of students with visual impairments teach in a variety of settings such as general education classrooms as itinerants, resource rooms, residential schools, and so forth, their presence is essential to the educational process for their students. The National Agenda supports your role and responsibility as a teacher. In addition, families, administrators, and your professional colleagues can more easily understand the unique needs of students with visual impairments when you use the goals of the National Agenda to structure your involvement.

Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TVIs) have a challenging job. In many states, they are isolated from

their colleagues in the field of blindness and low vision, because they are often the only teacher in their district or even county. They often work on their own, providing crucial services on a daily basis with little time to focus on issues outside of their sphere of influence. For these reasons, it is important that TVIs connect with the larger community of professionals serving students with visual impairments in efforts such as implementing the National Agenda. The following are suggestions for helping you gain and maintain knowledge about the goals of the National Agenda:

- Obtain copies of the National Agenda publications for distribution and ongoing reference. Most publications can be obtained by downloading them from the National Agenda web page. However, some of the hardcopies of publications are available from the American Foundation for the Blind and other organizations. See the resources section at the end of this document for specifics and contact information.
- Review the National Agenda web page periodically for updates and general information on how to contact your state coordinator or National Agenda Steering Committee Members. The National Agenda web page address is: www.tsbvi.edu/agenda.
- Use the eight goal areas of the National Agenda as a way to evaluate your school program or services provided statewide.

- Discuss your state's progress towards achieving the goals of the National Agenda with colleagues and parents of students with whom you work.
- Use the eight goals of the National Agenda as a framework for in-service training or for presentations at local parent or professional groups.
- Attend conference sessions that focus on updating teachers about the progress of the National Agenda.

Communicating with Parents, Administrators, and Colleagues

The National Agenda presents a framework for improving services to children and youth with visual impairments. This framework allows for the development of concrete issues to be identified, strategies to be implemented and a distinct message to be delivered to the public concerning the needs of children with visual impairments. The National Agenda is a set of priorities, stated as goals, which have been advanced by a unique network of state coordinators (Corn & Huebner, 1998). No less significant is the powerful grassroots base that supports the efforts of the National Agenda. The focus at the grassroots level emphasizes the power of individuals to have an impact on local, regional and national changes that impact the education of students who are blind or visually impaired. The National Agenda offers you a valuable communication tool. Parents, administrators, and other school personnel view TVIs as the primary resource for ideas and information related to working with students who have visual impairments. The National Agenda materials (see

the resource section at the end of this document for a listing of materials available) provide recognized documentation to assist educators in defining best practices in education and the provision of instructional services to students with visual impairments. Because many states have adopted state plans and have active committees working to implement the goals of the National Agenda, there are teams ready to give you support and supply you with additional, local resources.

The following are suggestions for how you can participate in this important effort by communicating with parents, administrators, and colleagues.

- Learn if your state has an active National Agenda working group. If such a group is available, communicate with the state coordinator(s) about opportunities to participate.
- If your state does not have an active National Agenda working group, work with colleagues in your state to develop and implement a state agenda that includes relevant National Agenda goals. Examples of state agendas are available for review on the National Agenda web site. The state agendas typically focus on specific local needs.
- Make sure that parents, administrators, and colleagues are aware of the goals of the National Agenda and the benefit of applying the framework of the National Agenda to educational plans for individual students.

- Use the framework of the National Agenda to communicate the necessary essential elements for educating children and youth who are blind or visually impaired. By using this framework, you are building a common base of understanding among parents and professionals.
- Use the framework of the National Agenda to organize IEP objectives for parents and students. For example, you might begin IEP meetings by providing a list of the expanded core curriculum areas (see Appendix A) and moving through each of the areas while discussing the student's strengths and needs.
- Provide information to administrators and professional colleagues about the National Agenda and how its structure provides support for communicating the importance of specialized services to parents and policy makers. (You may want to use the flyer designed for administrators that describes the National Agenda and tells how they can support it.)
- Coordinate local partnerships among people involved in the education of students with visual impairments to advocate for high quality services as outlined in the National Agenda.
- Structure your argument for adding new professionals to your school district or cooperative team around the National Agenda. Provide policy makers with a list of areas of the expanded core curriculum to point out the necessity for ongoing, intense support and direct

instruction from qualified teachers of students with visual impairments.

- Be instrumental in recruiting parents, administrators, and other teachers to join your state and local National Agenda committees.
- Develop a master list of your favorite web sites related to goals of the National Agenda and areas of the expanded core curriculum and share it with your colleagues, students, and their families.
- Make time to regularly speak to your students and their families about issues related to the shared goals of the National Agenda and opportunities for addressing the expanded core curriculum.
- Use consistent language regarding the expanded core curriculum at every opportunity so that students and families have a clear understanding of the assessed needs and instruction provided.
- Respond to questions and concerns posted on listservs based on your experiences and reference the National Agenda.
- Write articles for local, state or national newsletters or journals, including those for parents and focus on at least one of the eight goal areas.

Caseload Management

Teachers of students with visual impairments are often in a position to provide information to parents and administrators that will have an impact on decisions that are made about caseloads and hiring qualified teachers. In many cases, teachers are in school districts as the single person employed to address the needs of students with visual impairments. When this is the case, it may be difficult for a teacher to advocate for additional qualified personnel because such an argument may seem self-serving. In fact, advocating for appropriate levels of service for students with visual impairments is a professional responsibility.

In 1998, there were approximately 93,600 children and youth with visual impairments age 0-21 who received special education services. Of that number, it is estimated that 32,700 (35%) had a visual impairment as their only disability and 50,100 (53%) who had at least one additional disability (except deafness). In addition, 10,800 (12%) of these students were diagnosed as deaf-blind (Mason, Davidson, & McNERney, 2000).

It is difficult to determine the actual number of teachers of students with visual impairments needed nationwide, since the number of teachers is dependent on the unique needs of individual students. However, if the student:teacher ratio of 8:1 is used as an estimate, then for the approximately 93,600 children, 11,700 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers are needed. The current estimated number of FTE specialized teachers (visual impairment and deaf-blindness combined) is 6,700, leaving a deficit of 5,000 (Mason, Davidson, & McNERney, 2000).

The following are activities in which the use of the aforementioned demographic data might be helpful to advocate for appropriate services or to solicit additional funding to support your efforts:

- Provide rationale to administrators and/or school boards for services, manageable caseload sizes, qualified teachers, orientation and mobility specialists, and braille transcribers based on the assessed needs of students.
- Advocate for program emphasis on provision of services in areas of the expanded core curriculum (instruction in braille reading & writing, use of low vision devices, assistive technology, social skills, O&M, career education, activities of daily living, etc.).
- Document the need to purchase optical devices or assistive technology (electronic notetakers, speech and or braille output devices for computers, screen enlargement programs, etc.); and adaptive tools (audible levels, talking scales, beeping athletic equipment, brailled measuring devices, and so forth).
- Communicate information to parents and students about the population of students with visual impairments, emphasizing the need for parents and students to reach out to the broader community to connect with others who have the same needs and interests.
- Study the effectiveness of local, state or regional programs, especially the level of specialized services

available to children and youth with visual impairments. (This type of accountability requires performance-based measures that are tied to student achievement.)

- Provide the local media with accurate information about students' unique programs, accomplishments and capabilities.
- Involve the local community in support of summer employment opportunities, volunteerism, or related activities.
- Solicit assistance (fiscal or volunteer) from service organizations such as Lions' Clubs, Delta Gamma, and others.
- Write grant proposals requesting additional monies, resources, or innovative programming.

Assessment

The most important result of the National Agenda will be the provision of timely, quality educational services for students with visual impairments. A critical component for assuring the success of the goals is ongoing assessment of students to determine their unique educational needs. By conducting appropriate assessments, teachers of students with visual impairments identify students' specific needs related to the general curriculum and the content areas identified in the expanded core curriculum and their progress in each area. The following suggestions can help you prepare for this important role:

- Conduct ongoing specialized assessments including functional vision assessments, learning media assessments, assessments in the content areas of the expanded core curriculum, and assistive technology assessments.
- Support assessment of concept development and travel skills by certified Orientation & Mobility Instructors.
- Engage in diagnostic teaching activities designed to determine effective strategies for teaching specialized skills;
- Communicate results of assessments to parents and school administrators to gain support for appropriate services.

Timely Access to Instructional Materials

Students with visual impairments need to have accessible materials available in a timely manner in order to make steady progress in school. Given the often lengthy process of preparing or developing adapted or modified instructional materials, it is important for the teacher to take direct steps to assure that students have the materials at an appropriate time. These steps may include the following:

- Use the results of both clinical and functional vision assessments as well as a Learning Media Assessment to determine the types of instructional materials students need.

- Begin the process of ordering appropriate media for your students (adapted textbooks in large print, recorded format, electronic format, or braille) as early as possible in the school year.
- Facilitate in securing appropriate nonoptical and electronic low vision devices as well as prescribed optical devices for students with low vision.
- Collaborate with a local brailist to assure that braille textbooks and other instructional materials are prepared appropriately and in a timely manner. If a qualified brailist is not available and if one is needed, work with school administrators to train or hire such an individual.
- Follow closely the work of the *Solutions Forum*, a working group of professionals and adults with visual impairments who advocate nationally for the provision of accessible educational materials. For information on the *Solutions Forum*, visit the American Foundation for the Blind web site (www.afb.org).

Importance of Teaching the Expanded Core Curriculum

Although states differ in policy and practice, there is a model for broad programming that reaches beyond state borders—the National Agenda’s expanded core curriculum (Hatlen, 1996). The expanded core curriculum for students with visual impairments describes the skill areas necessary for students to develop and be prepared for a successful

adult life. This disability-specific curriculum goes beyond the academics skill areas and emphasizes an expanded learning base that is needed by every student with visual impairments. The expanded core curriculum offers the IEP team a base to review students' strengths and weaknesses.

The expanded core curriculum includes:

- ***Compensatory or functional academic skills, including communication modes;***
- ***Orientation and mobility;***
- ***Social interaction skills;***
- ***Independent living skills,***
- ***Recreation and leisure skills;***
- ***Career education;***
- ***Technology; and***
- ***Visual efficiency skills.***

Compensatory or functional academic skills include learning experiences such as concept development and spatial awareness, organizational skills, using braille or optical devices to read and write, using alternative communication systems such as sign language or the use of calendar systems, using recorded materials, and so forth.

Orientation and Mobility training focuses on alternatives to using sight for safe and independent travel purposes. In this instructional area, children are taught the use of the long cane and techniques for using any remaining vision that they may have such as the use of optical devices such as telescopes or monoculars.

Social interaction skills must be taught to children with visual impairments because they are unable to casually observe how people interact and socialize with one another. They must be taught when and how to smile, frown, nod, wink, shrug, and the many other nonverbal communication skills.

Independent living skills are the chores people perform, according to their abilities, which enable them to manage their homes and personal lives. These chores include grooming, eating and preparing meals, taking care of household chores, money and time management, and so forth.

Recreation and leisure skills may include traditional as well as adapted physical education activities. However, as with social interaction skills visually impaired children need help identifying the array of choices available to them in this area and must be taught how to perform leisure skills that most children learn through observation.

Career education for students with visual impairments needs to begin as early as possible and include self-awareness and career exploration activities, job seeking skills instruction, information about job keeping, and encourage opportunities for gaining work experience.

Instruction in the use and maintenance of assistive technology is needed in the curriculum for students with visual impairments. Assistive technology enables blind and visually students to access and store information from libraries around the world and the Internet. In addition, students with visual impairments can use assistive

technology for notetaking, studying for tests, research and a variety of other academic uses.

Visual efficiency skills are those skills that children with impaired, but good remaining vision use to make the most use of their remaining sight. Instruction in this area may focus on the use of optical devices such as magnifiers, bioptic aids, telescopes, closed circuit televisions, reading spectacles, and so forth.

The following are things you can do to focus on the expanded core curriculum areas in the work you do with your students:

- Make sure that all the expanded core curriculum areas needed by each student are included in his or her IEP.
- Make sure that appropriately qualified professionals (TVIs/COMS) teach the expanded core curriculum to students with visual impairments.
- Memorize the areas of the expanded core curriculum and be able to “rattle them off” at a moment’s notice when an administrator, classroom teacher or parent asks “What exactly *do you do*?”
- Use materials from the *Annotated Bibliography of Curricular Materials Related to the Core Curriculum for Children and Youths with Visual Impairment, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities* (Levack, 1997) and add to the bibliography as you discover additional relevant materials. This resource can be downloaded from the National Agenda web site.

- Develop new and different approaches to teaching the expanded core curriculum and share them with your peers in professional journals and monographs, through conference presentations, and organizational newsletters.

Summary

The goals in the National Agenda represent a wide spectrum of issues that have an impact on the quality of services provided to students in educational programs. The National Agenda's success in bringing attention to the need to achieve these goals has occurred as a result of the shared roles, responsibilities and commitments of professionals, parents, and consumers throughout the United States (Corn & Huebner, 1998).

Your knowledge, skills, and experiences as a teacher of students with visual impairments provide a perspective that is critical to forming and implementing solutions to all of the National Agenda goals. The following practical strategies summarize how you can promote a teacher's voice in the National Agenda effort:

- Read and reflect on the goals of the National Agenda. Develop your own positions and discuss the issues with colleagues.
- Periodically visit the National Agenda website to stay current on the National Agenda issues and materials. Copy and distribute key information to administrators,

general educators, parents, policymakers, and other interested parties.

- Participate in your state on committees or task forces that promote or support the National Agenda initiatives.
- Encourage discussion of the National Agenda goals and promote and implementation of the goals at local and state professional meetings.

Thank you for your interest in the National Agenda and *welcome*.

Publications authored by members of the National Agenda working groups include a flyer for administrators, which describes the National Agenda and how an administrator can support the effort; a booklet for parents, *The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities...A Parent Perspective*; and this booklet, *The National Agenda for the Education of Children and Youths with Visual Impairments, Including Those with Multiple Disabilities...A Teacher Perspective*. These publications are all available on-line at the National Agenda web page.

Power Point presentations are also available to download on the National Agenda web site to facilitate your efforts in presenting information about the National Agenda effort to parents, administrators, and other concerned professionals. Use them or modify them for your own presentations.

References

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Corn, A. L., & Huebner, K. M. (1998). *A report to the nation: The national agenda for the education of children and youths with visual impairments, including those with multiple disabilities*. New York: American Foundation for the Blind Press.

Hatlen, P. (1996). The core curriculum for blind and visually impaired students, including those with additional disabilities. *RE:view* 28, 25-32.

Levack, N. (1997). *Annotated bibliography of curricular materials related to the core curriculum for children and youths with visual impairment, including those with multiple disabilities*. Austin, TX: Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Spungin, S. J., & Ferrell, K. A. (1991). The role and function of the teacher of students with visual handicaps. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Resource List

There are a number of documents available to you that support practical application of the National Agenda. Although many of these materials are listed below, including publications that were generated as an outgrowth of National Agenda activities, this is not an inclusive list. Please continue to add to this list and share it with others.

Benoff, K., Lang, M. A., & Beck-Viisola, M. (2001). *Compendium of instruments for assessing the skills and interests of individuals with visual impairments or multiple disabilities*. New York: Lighthouse International.

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Notes:

